

Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643)

Anne Hutchinson is one of the most controversial figures in colonial American history. She was an extraordinary woman who led weekly in-depth discussions about the sermons delivered the previous Sunday by Boston ministers John Cotton and John Wilson. Partly because she had stepped out of the submissive role of her gender and partly because she began accusing John Wilson of preaching the “popish” doctrine of a covenant of works (salvation could be achieved through individual effort and not through faith alone), she was brought to trial. During the trial, she asserted that she was in direct communication with God. To Puritans, who believed that only scripture reveals God’s truth, this was the heresy of antinomianism. If the final authority of scripture was supplanted by direct communication with God, then what was to prevent any individual, even a murderer, from saying that he was only carrying out God’s command? This would lead to the breakdown of law. As a result, Anne Hutchinson was banished.

THE TRIAL OF ANNE HUTCHINSON, 1637

MR. WINTHROP, GOVERNOR: Mrs. Hutchinson, you are called here as one of those that have troubled the peace of the commonwealth and the churches here; you are known to be a woman that hath had a great share in the promoting and divulging of those opinions that are causes of this trouble, and . . . you have spoken divers things as we have been informed very prejudicial to the honour of the churches and ministers thereof, and you have maintained a meeting and an assembly in your house that hath been condemned by the general assembly as a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex, and notwithstanding that was cried down you have continued the same, therefore we have thought good to send for you to understand how things are, that if you be in an erroneous way we may reduce you that so you may become a profitable member here among us, otherwise if you be obstinate in your course that then the court may take such course that you may trouble us no further, therefore I would intreat you to express whether you do not hold and assent in practice to those opinions and factions that have been handled in court already, that is to say, whether you do not justify Mr. Wheelwright’s sermon and the petition.

MRS. HUTCHINSON: I am called here to answer before you but I hear no things laid to my charge.

SOURCE: Thomas Hutchinson, *History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts* (Boston, 1767).

- Gov: I have told you some already and more I can tell you.
- Mrs. H: Name one Sir.
- Gov: Have I not named some already?
- Mrs. H: What have I said or done?
- Gov: Why for your doings, this you did harbour and countenance those that are parties in this faction that you have heard of.
- Mrs. H: That's matter of conscience, Sir.
- Gov: Your conscience you must keep or it must be kept for you.
- Mrs. H: Must not I then entertain the saints because I must keep my conscience.
- Gov: Say that one brother should commit felony or treason and come to his other brother's house, if he knows him guilty and conceals him he is guilty of the same. It is his conscience to entertain him, but if his conscience comes into act in giving countenance and entertainment to him that hath broken the law he is guilty too. So if you do countenance those that are transgressors of the law you are in the same fact.
- Mrs. H: What law do they transgress?
- Gov: The law of God and of the state.
- Mrs. H: In what particular?
- Gov: Why in this among the rest, whereas the Lord doth say honour thy father and thy mother.
- Mrs. H: Ey Sir in the Lord.
- Gov: This honour you have broke in giving countenance to them.
- Mrs. H: In entertaining those did I entertain them against any act (for there is the thing) or what God hath appointed?
- Gov: You knew that Mr. Wheelwright did preach this sermon and those that countenance him in this do break a law.
- Mrs. H: What law have I broken?
- Gov: Why the fifth commandment.
- Mrs. H: I deny that for he saith in the Lord. . . .
- Gov: You have counselled them.
- Mrs. H: Wherein?
- Gov: Why in entertaining them.
- Mrs. H: What breach of law is that Sir?
- Gov: Why dishonouring of parents.
- Mrs. H: But put the case Sir that I do fear the Lord and my parents, may not I entertain them that fear the Lord because my parents will not give me leave?
- Gov: If they be the fathers of the commonwealth, and they of another religion, if you entertain them then you dishonour your parents and are justly punishable.
- Mrs. H: If I entertain them, as they have dishonoured their parents I do.
- Gov: No but you by countenancing them above others put honor upon them.
- Mrs. H: I may put honor upon them as the children of God and as they do honor the Lord.
- Gov: We do not mean to discourse with those of your sex but only this; you do adhere unto them and do endeavour to set forward this faction and so you do dishonour us.

MRS. H: I do acknowledge no such thing neither do I think that I ever put any dishonour upon you.

Gov: Why do you keep such a meeting at your house as you do every week upon a set day?

MRS. H: It is lawful for me so to do, as it is all your practices and can you find a warrant for yourself and condemn me for the same thing? The ground of my taking it up was, when I first came to this land because I did not go to such meetings as those were, it was presently reported that I did not allow of such meetings but held them unlawful and therefore in that regard they said I was proud and did despise all ordinances, upon that a friend came unto me and told me of it and I to prevent such aspersions took it up, but it was in practice before I came therefore I was not the first.

Gov: For this, that you appeal to our practice you need no confutation. If your meeting had answered to the former it had not been offensive, but I will say that there was no meeting of women alone, but your meeting is of another sort for there are sometimes men among you.

MRS. H: There was never any man with us.

Gov: Well, admit there was no man at your meeting and that you was sorry for it, there is no warrant for your doings, and by what warrant do you continue such a course?

MRS. H: I conceive there lies a clear rule in Titus, that the elder women should instruct the younger [Titus 2:3-5] and then I must have a time wherein I must do it. . . .

Gov: But suppose that a hundred men come unto you to be instructed will you forbear to instruct them?

MRS. H: As far as I conceive I cross a rule in it.

Gov: Very well and do you not so here?

MRS. H: No Sir for my ground is they are men.

Gov: Men and women all is one for that, but suppose that a man should come and say Mrs. Hutchinson I hear that you are a woman that God hath given his grace unto and you have knowledge in the word of God I pray instruct me a little, ought you not to instruct this man?

MRS. H: I think I may—Do you think it not lawful for me to teach women and why do you call me to teach the court?

Gov: We do not call you to teach the court but to lay open yourself. . . .

Gov: Your course is not to be suffered for, besides that we find such a course as this to be greatly prejudicial to the state, besides the occasion that it is to seduce many honest persons that are called to those meetings and your opinions being known to be different from the word of God may seduce many simple souls that resort unto you, besides that the occasion which hath come of late hath come from none but such as have frequented your meetings, so that now they are flown off from magistrates and ministers and this since they have come to you, and besides that it will not well stand with the Commonwealth that families should be neglected for so many

neighbours and dames and so much time spent, we see no rule of God for this, we see not that any should have authority to set up any other exercises besides what authority hath already set up and so what hurt comes of this you will be guilty of and we for suffering you.

MRS. H: Sir I do not believe that to be so.

GOV: Well, we see how it is we must therefore put it away from you, or restrain you from maintaining this course.

MRS. H: If you have a rule for it from God's word you may.

GOV: We are your judges, and not you ours and we must compel you to it.

MRS. H: If it please you by authority to put it down I will freely let you for I am subject to your authority. . . .

MR. DUDLEY, DEP. GOV: Here hath been much spoken concerning Mrs. Hutchinson's meetings and among other answers she saith that men come not there, I would ask you this one question then, whether never any man was at your meeting?

GOV: There are two meetings kept at their house.

DEP. GOV: How is there two meetings?

MRS. H: Ey Sir, I shall I not equivocate, there is a meeting of men and women and there is a meeting only for women.

DEP. GOV: Are they both constant?

MRS. H: No, but upon occasions they are deferred.

MR. ENDICOT: Who teaches in the men's meetings none but men, do not women sometimes?

MRS. H: Never as I heard, not one.

DEP. GOV: I would go a little higher with Mrs. Hutchinson. About three years ago we were all in peace. Mrs. Hutchinson from that time she came hath made a disturbance, and some that came over with her in the ship did inform me what she was as soon as she was landed. I being then in place dealt with the pastor and teacher of Boston and desired them to enquire of her, and then I was satisfied that she held nothing different from us, but within half a year after, she had vented divers of her strange opinions and had made parties in the country, and at length it comes that Mr. Cotton and Mr. Vane were of her judgment, but Mr. Cotton cleared himself that he was not of that mind, but now it appears by this woman's meeting that Mrs. Hutchinson hath so forestalled the minds of many by their resort to her meeting that now she hath a potent party in the country. Now if all these things have endangered us as from that foundation and if she in particular hath disparaged all our ministers in the land that they have preached a covenant of works, and only Mr. Cotton a covenant of grace, why this is not to be suffered, and therefore being driven to the foundation and it being found that Mrs. Hutchinson is she that hath depraved all the ministers and hath been the cause of what is fallen out, why we must take away the foundation and the building will fall.

MRS. H: I pray Sir prove it that I said they preached nothing but a covenant of works.

DEP. Gov: Nothing but a covenant of works, why a Jesuit may preach truth sometimes.

MRS. H: Did I ever say they preached a covenant of works then?

DEP. Gov: If they do not preach a covenant of grace clearly, then they preach a covenant of works.

MRS. H: No Sir, one may preach a covenant of grace more clearly than another, so I said. . . .

D. Gov: I will make it plain that you did say that the ministers did preach a covenant of works.

MRS. H: I deny that. . . .

D. Gov: What do I do charging of you if you deny what is so fully proved.

Gov: Here are six undeniable ministers who say it is true and yet you deny that you did say that they did preach a covenant of works and that they were not able ministers of the gospel, and it appears plainly that you have spoken it, and whereas you say that it was drawn from you in a way of friendship, you did profess then that it was out of conscience that you spake and said. The fear of man is a snare wherefore should I be afraid, I will speak plainly and freely.

MRS. H: That I absolutely deny, for the first question was thus answered by me to them. They thought that I did conceive there was a difference between them and Mr. Cotton. At the first I was somewhat reserved, then said Mr. Peters I pray answer the question directly as fully and as plainly as you desire we should tell you our minds. Mrs. Hutchinson we come for plain dealing and telling you our hearts. Then I said I would deal as plainly as I could, and whereas they say I said they were under a covenant of works and in the state of the apostles why these two speeches cross one another. I might say they might preach a covenant of works as did the apostles, but to preach a covenant of works and to be under a covenant of works is another business.

DEP. Gov: There have been six witnesses to prove this and yet you deny it.

MRS. H: I deny that these were the first words that were spoken.

Gov: You make the case worse, for you clearly shew that the ground of your opening your mind was not to satisfy them but to satisfy your own conscience. . . .

MRS. H: I acknowledge using the words of the apostle to the Corinthians unto him, that they that were ministers of the letter and not the spirit did preach a covenant of works. . . .

Gov: Let us state the case and then we may know what to do. That which is laid to Mrs. Hutchinson's charge is this, that she hath traduced the magistrates and ministers of this jurisdiction, that she hath said the ministers preached a covenant of works and Mr. Cotton a covenant of grace, and that they were not able ministers of the gospel, and she excuses it that she made it a private conference and with a promise of secrecy, &c. now this is charged upon her, and they therefore sent for her seeing she made it her table talk, and then she said the fear of man was a snare and therefore she would not be affeared of them. . . .

MRS. H: If you please to give me leave I shall give you the ground of what I know to be true. Being much troubled to see the falseness of the constitution of the church of England, I had like to have turned separatist; whereupon I kept a day of solemn humiliation and pondering of the thing; this scripture was brought unto me—he that denies Jesus Christ to be come in the flesh is antichrist—This I considered of and in considering found that the papists did not deny him to be come in the flesh nor we did not deny him—who then was antichrist? . . . The Lord knows that I could not open scripture; he must by his prophetic office open it unto me. . . . I bless the Lord, he hath let me see which was the clear ministry and which the wrong. Since that time I confess I have been more choice and he hath let me to distinguish between the voice of my beloved and the voice of Moses, the voice of John Baptist and the voice of antichrist, for all those voices are spoken of in scripture. Now if you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth I must commit myself unto the Lord.

MR. NOWELL: How do you know that that was the spirit?

MRS. H: How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?

DEF. GOV: By an immediate voice.

MRS. H: So to me by an immediate revelation.

DEF. GOV: How! an immediate revelation.

MRS. H: By the voice of his own spirit to my soul. I will give you another scripture, Jer. 46. 27, 28—out of which the Lord shewed me what he would do for me and the rest of his servants—But after he was pleased to reveal himself to me. . . . Ever since that time I have been confident of what he hath revealed unto me. . . . Therefore I desire you to look to it, for you see this scripture fulfilled this day and therefore I desire you that as you tender the Lord and the church and commonwealth to consider and look what you do. You have power over my body but the Lord Jesus hath power over my body and soul, and assure yourselves thus much, you do as much as in you lies to put the Lord Jesus Christ from you, and if you go on in this course you begin you will bring a curse upon you and your posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. . . .

GOV: The court hath already declared themselves satisfied concerning the things you hear, and concerning the troublesomeness of her spirit and the danger of her course amongst us, which is not to be suffered. Therefore if it be the mind of the court that Mrs. Hutchinson for these things that appear before us is unfit for our society, and if it be the mind of the court that she shall be banished out of our liberties and imprisoned till she be sent away, let them hold up their hands. . . .

GOV: Mrs. Hutchinson, the sentence of the court you hear is that you are banished from out of our jurisdiction as being a woman not fit for our society, and are to be imprisoned till the court shall send you away.

MRS. H: I desire to know wherefore I am banished?

GOV: Say no more, the court knows wherefore and is satisfied.

Young, Ralph F. Dissent in America.
New York: Pearson, 2006.